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Interview with Robert Hazzard by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Robert 'Hap' Hazzard

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Recommended Citation

Hazzard, Robert 'Hap', "Interview with Robert Hazzard by Andrea L'Hommedieu" (2009). *George J. Mitchell Oral History Project*. 130.

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Robert “Hap” Hazzard
(Interviewer: *Andrea L’Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 137
August 31, 2009

Andrea L’Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is August 31, 2009, and I’m at my office in H-L Library. This is Andrea L’Hommedieu and today I’m interviewing Robert Hazzard.

Robert Hazzard: Hap Hazzard.

AL: Hap Hazzard.

RH: Was my nickname at Bowdoin.

AL: Oh, okay.

RH: So beware of whatever I say.

AL: Right. And can you start by spelling your name for me?

RH: My last name is Hazzard, H-A-Z-Z-A-R-D, and first name Robert, but nickname at Bowdoin was Hap, and still is in the tennis and running societies through the years, so that’s always been my name affiliated with sports, I guess.

AL: Okay. And where and when were you born?

RH: I was born in Gardiner, Maine in 1932, so I was in the class of ‘54 at Bowdoin.

AL: So you grew up in Gardiner?

RH: Grew up in Gardiner.

AL: What was it like at that time?

RH: Well, to me it was a wonderful way to grow up. It’s a very close community, very close friends. Gardiner was always very involved in athletics and we played football all the time, and all the sports. [We] used to play basketball with a friend up the road that, his folks raised two cows and chickens and, right in the middle of town. And we had to go up and, we had to wait until they had milked the cows before we could use the hayloft to play basketball every night.

So anyway, it was a great way to grow up. We had no TV, radio was the big media thing, and that was mostly local, so very insular.

AL: Right. And what were your parents' names?

RH: I was named after my dad, Robert Hazzard, and my mother was Margaret Wyman, from Augusta, but he was from Gardiner, so I was third generation in Gardiner.

AL: And what did they do for a living?

RH: My father, actually my grandfather started a shoe factory and it was a fairly large one in the teens and the '20s and right up through WWII, and the family sold it in the early '50s, before I had a chance to ruin it.

AL: So that's what they did most of your growing up.

RH: Yes, yeah, yeah. So they were active, they were open and working during the Depression and it was one of the largest industries in Maine, that and the textile industry. It kept people somewhat busy, but it was tough sledding.

AL: What kind of shoes did they make in Gardiner?

RH: They made a very inexpensive men's shoe that they sold up and down the east coast, I think they sold through Sears Roebuck at one point and this kind of thing, mail order. But it was a two-dollar shoe, which in those days was a lot of money.

AL: So sports were prevalent throughout your life.

RH: Absolutely, and still is, yes.

AL: And so in high school, tell me about high school.

RH: High school, I was very reserved, quiet I guess you'd say. People say I talk too much now, but yes. High school, again, my biggest outlet was participating in sports. To me that was acceptance of being one of the gang, and so I played just about everything. Our sophomore year I was playing basketball, and our team, Gardiner High, went the whole season without winning a game, which was unheard of in Gardiner. My father had played hockey in college and he and a couple other guys approached the town and talked them into allowing them to form a hockey team for Gardiner High School, and so my junior and senior year, and a lot of us he had coached as kids playing pond hockey and everything, and we had a pretty good team for two years. And that got me into hockey, which I later played at Bowdoin, and really until I retired when Gordie Howe did, at age fifty.

AL: And did you have brothers or sisters growing up?

RH: I had two younger brothers, yes, and they're both deceased now, so I'm the last of the line. A lot of nephews and we have five children, so, yes, a lot of family.

AL: And so it was during high school that you first heard of the Mitchell family.

RH: Yes, it was really prior to high school, it was 1945 that the Mitchells from Waterville, George's older brothers and the Jabar boys won the New England basketball championship, and I guess that would have been when I was junior high school. And they were just the heroes of the state of Maine, and that's where I first came across the Mitchell family, as such, but it was strictly people I had never met but had a great deal of admiration for. So yes, that was, so I didn't meet George until we were both freshmen at Bowdoin, which would have been 1950.

AL: And how did you come to go to college at Bowdoin, was going for higher education something your parents promoted or encouraged when you were growing up?

RH: Absolutely, and my dad had gone to Williams College. His father started the family business, never went to college and had no strong feelings about advanced education, but my father felt very strongly that we should all give it a try anyway. So when I graduated from high school, Gardiner High School, I had just turned seventeen, and I think he could tell that I wasn't quite ready perhaps maturity wise to, and I had applied to Bowdoin and was accepted, and he talked me out of it and was able to get me into Deerfield Academy as a post-graduate, a lot of it being the athletics program, and so I attended that for a year and really learned something about studying and some good habits.

And one – it's a nice little story really – is Doctor [Frank L.] Boyden, who was the head of it, and had been for fifty-some years, and he was like a small god. I don't know if you know his background, but he just controlled, in those days he could put anyone from Deerfield wherever he wanted to put them, just by a phone call. And I had applied to Dartmouth, Bowdoin, and Williams, because Dad went to Williams, I think he kind of was pushing me that way. And while I was at Deerfield I was playing sports but one thing I really enjoyed the most was hockey, and we played the Dartmouth freshmen and Dartmouth at that time was one of the big hockey teams in the east, and I really wanted to go there and not Bowdoin to play hockey.

And we went up and we got just taken apart by the freshmen, and I decided that well, I'm not going to be able to play hockey at Dartmouth, I really don't like the kids I've met at Deerfield going to Williams, it was kind of a country club attitude, and so probably I'll end up going to Bowdoin. Well that spring, I was walking to class one day past the headmaster's desk, he was off in an alcove, and if he called you as you were going to class, look out, because something's wrong. "Mr. Hazzard, would you come over here a minute?" And I went over, "Yes, Dr. Boyden?" He said, "Sit down a minute," he said, "I notice you've applied to three very good schools, and what's your preference? Where would you like to go, because you've got to make your mind up pretty quick." And I said, typical seventeen-year-old, well at that point I'd just turned eighteen, I said, "Gee, I'm not quite sure yet." And Dr. Boyden looked at me, he said,

“Well look Bob, you go across the hall and you sit down and you think about it, and when you make up your mind you come back and we’ll talk.”

So I went across, I didn’t want to miss my class, and I went through the process and said, gee, I’m not going to play hockey at Dartmouth, and I know a lot of people at Bowdoin, I want to go to Bowdoin. So I came back, “I would like to go to Bowdoin.” “That’s a fine choice, Bob, I think you’d be very happy at Bowdoin.” Picked up [the phone], called the admissions department, I was into Bowdoin. And that was, yeah, but that was the way things were then, it wasn’t that competitive, it was right after the war. So that’s how I ended up as, I was in Hyde Hall my freshman year, had two roommates, and I was right next door to George Mitchell, so that’s really how I met him, is my freshman year at Bowdoin.

AL: So can you talk about Bowdoin and meeting George Mitchell, I mean what kind of a young man was he? He was quite young.

RH: Yes, he was, just eighteen I guess, maybe less. Yes, because he was a year after me, he was a year behind me in high school, and I did the PG year at Deerfield, so yes, I’m seventy-seven, he’s seventy-six now probably.

I look back at it, just one incident that pulls the whole thing together and saves everyone a lot of time, but I have known George since that first year at Bowdoin. I don’t think my opinion of him has changed a bit, I mean at that time I took him as just one of the guys. He was not someone, ‘Hey, this guy’s going to be something,’ you know, he was not that way. He was just a nice guy, and his study habits were good, but he was on full scholarship, he had a job driving an oil truck. So he worked hard, but there was no evidence of that.

I guess the incident that sticks in my mind the most really is that, when you first sent me a letter I said, God, the incidence of the way I remember George is maybe once a week, once every two weeks, he’d knock on the door – he was right next door to me, rooming with Dan Gulezian, and occasionally we’d see each other in the hall, we didn’t take that many courses together, but he was just a good friend that, you know, I was very comfortable with. Not a close friend, but someone you knew that, gee, if you ever needed help I’d feel very comfortable going to him. Fortunately I never needed to, but. So we were distant friends I guess from then on.

And the incident that really, I guess, brought me as close to George as I’ve ever been was, every week or two around nine thirty or ten he’d knock on the door, he’d say, “Hap, Hap, time to stop studying, you got to” –we were in Hyde Hall right near the old gym – “let’s go over and shoot some hoops.” And because he had always, he probably looked up to his brothers as great athletes and everything, and he was never a fireball athlete by any means, but he was always in the shadow of them. But he loved just going, we’d just go over, the two of us, and just play whatever it is, one-on-one, shooting hoops. And that was the way I remember him. “Hap, let’s get out of studying and go shoot.” So he didn’t have his nose in a book the whole time, but he put in a long, long day, he really did.

So I had a lot of respect for him, and I knew him later. We both worked in Portland in the '60s; before he got into politics he was an attorney.

AL: And what did you do for work?

RH: I was a CPA, did tax work, I had my own practice. And so we used to play occasionally, I think we used to play mixed doubles tennis. We cut it a little bit, but just very occasionally. So I never kept up with his life. Portland being a fairly small town, I knew what was going on, and see him on the street or something like that. But we were not buddy-buddies at that point.

AL: Tell me about Bowdoin, about Bowdoin College when you were here for college. I'm interested in who were the professors that were memorable to you, and what was the campus like, how has it changed over time?

RH: Well, it's much larger, but it really hasn't physically [changed]. The old dorms have been renovated and everything, but there were, I think it was around, I think there were about eight hundred in the school then, so it's about double now. And so really, as far as men, it was a male college and weekends the place was empty. Either people would go home or off to Boston or Portland or something like that.

AL: What did you do socially, being an all men's college?

RH: Well, we had a lot of parties every weekend, and it wasn't good. I mean it, well it was good I guess at the time. I never really drank socially until my junior year, but there was plenty available to anyone at any age. And it was really overdone, yeah. I think that, at the time, that was a real positive to the college, and everyone would say, wow, this is, what a great, and we'd have great weekends. They had the formal weekends like, with the house parties, Ivy Weekend, and usually the football game weekends that, there were a lot of gals that would come up to the school. So socially there was a lot of interaction.

AL: And were there professors that you remember?

RH: The professors, the ones I remember I didn't do the greatest in their courses, but I think those are the ones you remember. And that's, I guess, what I got out of Bowdoin, was the diversification that I got as a student because I majored in economics, which the only accounting course they offered then was a basic accounting course, which was the worst course I ever took at Bowdoin and I think I got an A, but obviously I was heading in that direction. But yes, I liked the broad based liberal arts, to me, it rounded me out as a person. I had never heard classical music, and I took a classical survey course, Beethoven to Bach and what have you, and [Frederic Erle Thornlay "Tilly"] Tillotson was the head of the music department, and he was just wonderful. I mean he'd play the piano and do these things, played records, and it was just a wonderful survey course. Out of that I think I formed affection for classical music, without all this other stuff.

And the other really memorable one was, I think I was partially dyslexic, I'm kind of left handed and right handed, and I read this way and I'm a slow reader and imagine being a CPA and reading tax law. Yes, I really had to focus. But I took this course in Beowulf to Chaucer from Robert Peter Tristram Coffin, the English professor, and he was a 'local.' I don't know if you're familiar with him, he was a poet and just an incredible person, and it was more of a lecture course and I don't know why but I was sitting in the front row, and he had a big walrus moustache, and he was a quite elderly man, and he talked at a lectern and he used to roll his own cigarettes and everyone said, "I think it's tobacco." And he would light these with kitchen matches, and of course they would go out as he was talking, and he'd light them and they were only about this [far away], and you'd say, 'God, his moustache is going to go up in flames.'

I was thinking of everything except Chaucer and Beowulf, and he would talk about – Beowulf was mysticism and so forth – and he was talking about, "Well, any of you ever seen a sea monster? I have. I went out lobstering with my uncle" something-or-other, and he'd fabricate these stories about this sea monster coming up into the boat and he was just a wonderful, wonderful mind. Yes, and I didn't do well in the course, but I remember that.

That and then there was a similar one, I can't remember his name now, but he was in the classics department. It was in Greek mythology, in English, and the old, so I mean they were wonderful, they were both lecture courses and I couldn't tell you even anything about the subject but the professors were just wonderful. And he had – what's his name, anyway, nice guy, and he was getting along and brought all the stray dogs into his room and he'd talk, it was one of the old, maybe it was Massachusetts Hall, big windows, in the spring he'd open up to get the fresh air, and there'd be two or three scroungy dogs. Well, every once in a while a window would bang and everyone would wake up and the dogs would start barking.

AL: Very, more informal.

RH: Very informal, yes. And we had, like economics; we'd break down into seminars, a dozen or so. It was good. I don't think I learned a lot about specific subjects, but learned a lot about people, and it just broadened me, it was great, wonderful.

AL: And did you take away friendships that you kept over the years?

RH: Oh gosh, yes, I was chairman of our 55th reunion this year, so yes, and we didn't have much of a turnout, which I think had a lot to do with the economy. You know, they come up here for a three-day weekend. Yes, I've kept very close with them. And of course living in Brunswick I get to see, in fact one of the classmates that came both to the 50th and this 55th was Bruce Cooper who, he and his wife live in, near Santa Barbara, up in the hills, and they have a thirty-plus foot motor home, and they spend all the winters in these trailer parks, which I guess are really elegant. They have crafts and swimming and all of the things, and both years they motored all the way through the South and came up to the reunion. And we're out near Point Road and have a lot of room, so I said, you can, he had said, "Well you got room for me to park this?" And I said, "Oh yeah." Well you know, once he got it on the lawn we had a little trouble

getting it off. Anyways.

AL: Were there any classmates that you recall that *were* really close to George Mitchell in college? Was he like best friends with somebody?

RH: I don't know. I know the fraternity, he was a Sigma Nu and I was, as I say, right next door to it, and I played hockey and a lot of the fellows I played hockey with were in the same fraternity with George. I'd end up over there a lot and I was in touch, and not too much, you know, I don't think he was, he wasn't active socially but I remember going over, he was probably working or studying or something.

That was really, I remember the studying, and particularly in the dorms, well the only way to study was to go to the library. And they had those big leather chairs upstairs, and that was deadly because, trying to stay awake in these comfortable chairs was tough to do.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think is important to add?

RH: No, really that one story I think, the 'Hap, it's time to shoot some hoops.' And we'd talk about life and all that, never really too much personal about his, I mean I've learned mostly about his background through things that I've read.

AL: The media.

RH: Yes, and well he talked to us, at the 50th [class reunion] he talked to us and really right from the beginning he told about his, you've probably heard of or read about it, but his first trip and how he got into Bowdoin and all this, and it's a wonderful story, I just wait to see something like this, because, but really, my whole focus on that one connection I had with him I guess as a freshman. And really after that I didn't see much of him the other three years at Bowdoin, but I think perhaps I became more social and he became a little -

AL: Studying.

RH: Yeah, staid, and I think, I don't think he was a brilliant guy, I think he had to work hard to do what he did, and he had some wonderful connections through Muskie and so forth but, opened some doors for him. But my God, look where he is now, I just can't believe it, I mean he's just incredible.

AL: Well great, thank you so much.

RH: Okay.

End of Interview